

# *Guardian Unlimited*

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## **UN: Indigenous Women Victims of Violence**

**By Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press Writer**

UNITED NATIONS (AP) – A human rights activist from Kenya claimed British soldiers have raped hundreds of women from her Somber tribe. A Canadian lawyer said over 500 indigenous women have died as a result of sexual violence in the last 20 years. A Nicaraguan surgeon accused Honduran soldiers and farmers of raping women from her Miskita tribe.

As a two-week meeting on the world's progress toward gender equality neared an end, indigenous women described the double discrimination they are subjected to and the high level of violence it produces.

“For indigenous women, gender-based violence is fueled by racism and discrimination as well as sexism,” said Elissavet Stamatopoulou, chief of the secretariat of the U.N.’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. She said violence is perpetuated by policies that deny indigenous women access to education, health care and the justice systems....

Rebecca Lolosoli, who founded the Umoja Uaso Women’s Group in northern Kenya over 10 years ago to help woman who were allegedly raped by British soldiers, accused the Kenyan and British governments of not supporting Samburu women subjected to sexual attacks – or their children, many of them white.

“So many rapes have been done by the British Army,” she said, claiming “the number of raped women (in) the whole Samburu is like 1,600 women, but the area which I come from is like 400 women.” She claimed many women have been killed by their husbands because of the rapes, though she had no figures.

Lolosoli said the rapes have caused the break-up of families, with husbands telling their wives to leave and calling them “prostitutes.” The soldiers have never been prosecuted and never provided support for the raped women or their children, she said.

“We are like forgotten people,” Lolosoli said, explaining that the British Ministry of Defense only sent some investigators and the Kenyan government “doesn’t believe” the soldiers were responsible for any rapes.

The London law firm Leigh, Day and Co. is preparing a class-action suit against the British government in the name of hundreds of Samburu and Masai women from the semiarid region in north-central Kenya used by British troops for tropical training since 1972.

Mirna Cunningham, a former Nicaraguan government minister and member of the National Assembly who is now president of the Center for Indigenous Peoples' Autonomy and Development, claimed Miskita women working the fields across the border in Honduras are raped every year by Honduran soldiers and farmers.

“In Latin America, indigenous women face violence much more than other women,” she said, citing more than 600 women killed every year in Guatemala, reports of women being used as “a weapon of war” in Colombia and the unsolved slayings of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

“Remember there is a lot of racism in our cultures,” Cunningham told reporters. “Indigenous women are more subject to be raped and accused of being prostitutes because they are raped.”

Celeste McKay, a Metis or mixed-blood descendant of French settlers and Indians who is an analyst with the Native Women's Association of Canada, said indigenous women aged 25 to 44 are five times more likely than non-Indigenous women to die as a result of violence.

The association “estimates that over 500 indigenous women in the past 20 years have died as a result of violence of a sexual nature,” she said.

“Indigenous women in Canada are vulnerable to this violence because they are marginalized in Canadian society,” McKay said. “They are homeless, they are poor, they suffer from the effects of the residential school system” which broke up families.

While Canada promotes the protection of human rights internationally, she cited a recent Amnesty International report which said the lives of indigenous women remain at risk partly because Canadian officials have failed to implement critical measures to reduce their marginalization.

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